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Why Has Incest Always Been Repressed?

A CONVERSATION WITH ALBERTO MORAVIA

In 1965 Moravia's novel *The Lie* created a storm not only because it showed the then-fashionable leftist tendencies of Italian intellectuals to be crumbling under the weight of their disappointment with the materialism of their own national proletariat, but also because it tackled, for the first time, the problem of incest, in Italian society, which, with its tightly knit traditional family structure, had long been suspected to be a secret hotbed of this vice.

Twenty years later the book is being made into a film by Giovanni Soldati, son of the writer Mario Soldati (*Fontamara*), a young family friend of Moravia's and the life companion of the actress Stefania Sandrelli (*The Key*), who, along with Ben Cross, plays a major role in the film—that of a mother who offers her daughter to her husband in order to hold him. The daughter is played in the film by Amanda Sandrelli, who is Stefania's daughter in real life.

This conversation took place on the set of the film. For the script, Moravia had streamlined the story and brought it up to date.



In 1965 certain ideas expressed by you in this book were far ahead of their time, specifically the notions about the nature of work and the selfish pragmatism of the intelligentsia in Italy. Are you not concerned that making the film with an "updated" script will make these ideas sound much less revolutionary?

That is self evident. For the film we have suppressed the reflections on writing—the novel was structured as a novel within a novel—and we only tell the story of these characters, of this woman and her husband and what happens between them in that society.

In the book I had endeavored to show how a novel is born and how it takes shape in the

mind of a writer, and how a novel in the process of being born can take the place of a writer's conscience. All this was eliminated, because the cinema has limits. There are things which in the cinema cannot be said.

If you tried to tell them, you would have to find the filmic equivalent, something visual, that could replace the mental and intellectual dimension of writing. I accept, therefore, that in this sense the film is less revolutionary.

You are using the metaphor of incest in order to underline the lack of emotion and of deepfelt relations between people, reducing personal contacts to sheer physical acts. Can this metaphor, today, still be employed without becoming banal?

I don't think so. My idea was this: to show a woman who prostitutes her daughter, but not for money or anger or vice, but because she really believes in a view of things where this becomes positive. She thinks of herself as a sort of high priestess of sex. She wants to initiate her daughter to prostitution as once upon a time it was done in India; in fact, I think it is still done, they are sacred prostitutes. The woman thinks that the daughter should be a prostitute because that is the best thing she could do.

The idea of incest, on the other hand, comes from the fact that in all my work there is always a question of infraction, of the breaking of laws and limits, the revolt against taboos and established codes. From the beginning in my novels there has always been an act of transgression, an idea which represents the complication of pleasure. The simple way it is usually said is that it is more pleasurable to do the things which break rules than the things that all are doing.

It seems that for many people it is more pleasurable to go to bed with a woman with whom they shouldn't be going to bed, than



Moravia at work (Photo: Deborah Beer)

going to bed with a woman with whom it is the natural thing to do. It's the idea upon which De Sade based all his books. It's a form of sadism—not sadism in the sense of cruelty but sadism in the sense of breaking the law, transgressing upon norms established by “normal” life. It is in this sense that I am using the metaphor of incest in this work.

These laws we have established within living memory, but these transgressions, according to you, are in the blood. Do you mean to say that the transgressions are more “normal” than the laws?

No, but I believe this: let's take incest—it's one of humanity's successes. Humanity has managed to create this extraordinary thing: the living together of men and women at the height of their sexual energy without their having sexual relations. And not only are they not having them, they are not even thinking of having them. A great success. You must admit, a greater invention could not have been made . . .

But remember that the taboo of incest is fairly recent. Whereas for example in my book incest only serves to supply a bit of condiment for pleasure, in Sophocles incest is a real tragedy. That means that in the time of Sophocles the taboo of incest must have been a fairly recent invention. At least they were 2000 or 3000 years less removed from its inception than we are. Today, I think, we look upon incest with a certain indifference, whereas in those days a guy gouged his eyes out for having made love to his own mother, right?

The interpretation you give, in your book, to the myth of Oedipus, is, in fact, one of the more interesting aspects of the novel,

because what you accuse Oedipus of—of being insufficiently interested in the real world—has become a primary social phenomenon of our age, of our youth.

The whole problem is recent. Before Freud, it didn't exist. It was thought that the young loved their parents and the parents loved their offspring. Freud discovered, instead, that the family was full of guilt. And the main guilt derived from the taboo of incest. Today, psychoanalysis has demoted this taboo machinery. That means we live in an epoch where we look at the taboo frontally—really there aren't any more taboos. Which doesn't mean sisters and brothers or mothers and sons must go to bed with each other. But it does mean that a great mystery has been disbanded. Today, if these things should occur, they would no longer impress anyone.

Are you advocating a view that incest would be a nice thing to do?

I don't even think it's against the law; certainly it's not prohibited. What is prohibited is being seen at it, obscene acts in public. But I do not think that today a brother and sister who make love would end up in prison. All I think it is, today, is a sort of second-nature in man, the incest taboo, and that's why we are not doing it. But who knows how long this attitude will last? Maybe tomorrow we'll have marriages between brothers and sisters, like in the days of the Pharaohs.

What about hereditary damage?

I think incest was initially prohibited for two reasons: according to Engels it occurred because it stopped the transmission of capital wealth. According to Malinowski it came up because culture could no longer be transmitted. Personally I tend to side with Malinowski.

Your preference for Malinowski reminds me of a section in the very first few pages of the book where you speak of the disillusionment of the left. It seems to me that is the pivot of the book. Is that, for you, a Malinowski-type sociological observation or is it something you have experienced yourself?

I have lived through a lot of Italian history. What I have wanted to show here is what happens to a man who was probably on the left in about 1950 right after the war, when in Italy there was a great movement on the left.

It was analogous to the movement of 1968. Except that in 1968 it was not a movement linked especially to communism, whereas in 1950 it was the Communist Party which carried the struggle.

This man at a certain point is disillusioned with the left, but not on a political level. He is disillusioned with the people. He had identified the left with a woman of the people. He had wanted to have a sexual experience with the people. His political ideas had made him idealize a woman of the people.

This happens frequently; Stendhal called it “crystallization”—a very snobbish young man would fall in love with a duchess, and so a man of the left would fall in love with a woman of the lower classes. Or a man with ideas about the Third World falls in love with an African woman. It’s a matter of sexual symbols. Sex becomes a catalyst for ideas. Obviously this can only lead to disillusionment.

You could say that what happened to this man in my book is what later did happen to Pasolini. Pasolini was a very cultured man, a very sophisticated intellectual but at a certain point he identified his idea of the people with the boys from the people with whom he was making love. He idealized the people.

At that time Italy was very poor, and so the slums which Pasolini discovered through his books were full of very poor and very sympathetic young boys. What he couldn’t foresee, or didn’t foresee, anyway, was that with the advent of the “boom”—the prosperity wave in the fifties—these poor boys turned into boys who loved worldly goods, wanted Kawasaki motorcycles and to be rich. That was the crisis of Pasolini’s view of the world, of his *Weltanschauung*. It was a serious break for him.

Of course I didn’t think of Pasolini when I wrote the book (I wrote the book before this happened to him) but I thought of analogous cases of people I knew. I wanted to show that this woman of the people in the end had a very complicated type of psychology and belonged neither to the people nor to the bourgeois class, and that she—under the man’s nose—organized a brothel, a “casa di appuntamenti.” That idealizations are always mistakes.

Every man is complete in himself, it is of no



DeSica’s *TWO WOMEN*—based on the Moravia novel.

importance whether he is rich or poor, of the people or of the bourgeois class. Every man is a great mystery.

May I then ask you the obvious banal question—does this book have, for you, a personal, autobiographical dimension?

Not at all, on the contrary. Of course, a writer always talks about things he knows, because he must talk about these. But what he uses is the basic experience, not the detailed facts. Take my book *La Ciociara* (*A Woman of Rome*). A book about the war. Well, I lived through the war as a basic experience, I was on the front lines between the Germans and our own fascists. But the characters are invented. It’s the basic experience which is autobiographical.

In this book therefore, there is my basic experience with the Italian left and of course, if you want, also my basic experience with prostitution: like all men, I know what this is. But the characters and the story are totally invented.

What about “biographical” in terms of the novelist’s craft?

Well, yes, it’s an experimental novel. The work within the work. The same technique as *Six Characters in Search of an Author* by Pirandello. In fact, when I had finished the book I discovered that I had told almost the same story as he had told in that play, without having been aware of it. There, too, a stepfather goes to a “casa di appuntamento” and finds his stepdaughter. But all that means is a reiteration of the fact that there are really very few stories. Who said that?

To me, Renoir.

They are always the same. You start telling a new one and you find it’s really an old one.

You have always been concerned in your work with the question of whether "reality" exists outside of the work of the artist . . .

Yes, the basis of my whole narrative is the relationship with reality. It's remained a mystery to me all my life, this relationship. The problem keeps cropping up. In psychiatric terms I think this lack of relationship with reality is called . . . I've forgotten the term. But when the artist has the brush in his hand with which he knows he can represent reality in a totally invented form, he *must* have doubts as to the existence of reality itself as an objective quality. That's how Kandinsky was able to state that the white canvas was the most beautiful painting.

Doesn't "relationship with reality" include the question of being "understood"?

That's of no importance. In modern art, the rule of similarity no longer exists. There are only two rules, two categories in modern art: expression and benefit. Expression, on a white canvas, exists: I have expressed myself. Benefit there is none, but what the hell . . . Or when Duchamps sent a toilet bowl to the Armory Show in New York in 1916 and said it was a protest against war, it was a form of expression, but without benefit: it was still an ordinary toilet bowl.

In the cinema, where the machine that makes it depends itself on a purely chemical reproduction process, isn't it even more likely that the creative "brush"-like treatment of

reality will be curbed?

Yes, literature is more open. A dog in literature is a universal dog, but a dog in the cinema is only that particular dog.

So the cinema is the least Platonic art form, the one that deals least with essence and most with detail? Is it therefore a good vehicle for what you call "basic experience," which is after all a dealing in essence?

Yes, cinema is quite passively linked to reality, to photographic reality.

And yet you've permitted that almost all your works were translated into this medium which cannot but reduce them in stature?

In fact . . . but the cinema can also do marvellous things that literature can't. It can and does change reality, often in an overpowering, arrogant way. Maybe more so than other arts can. In literature and painting that which changes reality is above all the style of a work. It's style that introduces change. But the cinema changes reality itself. In other arts style is mysterious and personal in imposing itself upon an existing reality, but in the cinema the artist—the director, in this case—uses the camera in order to create a totally new reality, to create a new reality in the place of the old one, and that, too, is part of the chemistry of the camera, which lends itself to manipulation. Style is not a manipulation, it is an expression. But with the camera, dealing with reality becomes manipulation.

VIRGINIA WRIGHT WEXMAN

The Critic as Consumer: Film Study in the University, *Vertigo*, and the Film Canon

The world of art, a sacred island systematically and ostentatiously opposed to the profane, everyday world of production, a sanctuary for gratuitous, disinterested activity in a universe given over to money and self-interest, offers, like theology in a past epoch, an imaginary anthropology obtained by

denial of all the negations really brought about by the economy. —Pierre Bourdieu¹

Though critics customarily consider themselves disinterested observers, their activities are shaped by concrete historical processes. The recent development of a group of film